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Reporting from the Field: The Narrative Reconstruction of Experience in Pick-up Artist Online Communities

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Abstract: This study focuses on the reconstruction of experience in the online environment of the Pick-up Artist (PUA) community forums and aims to uncover yet another facet of personal narrative, namely the role and performance of framing in the reporting of events. Discursive psychologists have often pointed out that a narrative is not a precise reflection of reality but a device that itself shapes the social world because reality always under-determines the verbal representation of events. In this study, we show how the verbalisation of narrative guides the reader towards the intended understanding by establishing the shared knowledge schema in the community of practice. Utilising data from a specific genre in the PUA forums, the "field reports" (i.e. narrative reconstructions of encounters between the PUAs and women), we describe three pertinent layers of frames, how they are evoked linguistically and how they interact with each other. Our investigation of the hierarchical framing of the interaction as [PUA TRAINING], [PERSONAL NARRATIVE] and [SUCCESS REPORT] shows that they are based on group-specific knowledge schemas but, at the same time, draw on conventionalised narrative structures.

Keywords: frames, narrativity online, pick-up artists, knowledge schemas, narrative structure

1 Introduction

A quarter of a century ago, the internet exploded with a new sort of dating advice for men: shockingly instrumental, businesslike and unromantic. The men giving out this advice called themselves pick-up artists (PUA). While following the practical instructions of these PUA gurus on how to get a woman into bed, their audience started to organise spontaneously into online communities where they could exchange detailed reports and discuss "the game" with like-minded strangers, safe in the anonymity of the internet.

The pick-up artists may be past their media heyday with the eponymous TV show[1] off the screens and the defining book by Neil Strauss[2] no longer in the bestselling list. But the movement still thrives nowadays, as is evident in the great number of internet forums in the Anglophone and Germanophone space devoted

1 *The Pickup Artist* ran for two seasons on VH1 (2007-2008). Produced in a reality TV format, the show features the host, a self-proclaimed master pick-up artist called Mystery, teaching seduction techniques to the show's contestants who were depicted as inexperienced and unassertive in dating (IMDb – The Pickup Artist).

2 *The Game: Penetrating the Secret Society of Pickup Artists* (2007) is a non-fictional account by the author, Neil Strauss, recounting his experiences living in the PUA community for two years (The Game – Neil Strauss).

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to PUA advice, seduction techniques and "field reports". It is the latter discourse activity that has attracted our attention as an example of a reality-constructing narrative (although of course any narrative is a reconstruction of the past within a certain organisational schema, the PUA field reports make this aspect of a narrative especially clear). The field report has survived through the years surprisingly intact, its raison d'être - a sort of post-flight debriefing with room for comments and corrections, - and the venue, a somewhat old-fashioned message board, remaining the same as in the 90s.

Our data comes from a corpus of 37 postings (24,000 tokens) collected from Anglophone PUA forums that do not require registration to post or read the messages. The pick-up community itself is so large and diffuse that trying to provide any demographic estimates would be meaningless (contrary to one's intuition, there even exists a significant female PUA following). Our sample of forum posts were written by 23 different male authors (according to the profile information); all the posts originate from May 2014. The corpus was manually annotated by two coders for PUA-specific terminology and for the reports of success or failure. We have also collected a comparable reference corpus from a non-PUA dating advice forum for men for the purposes of keyword analysis. All corpus analysis has been carried out with the help of the freeware concordancer AntConc (Anthony 2014).

Although this poignant topic undoubtedly invites sociolinguistic scrutiny, we would like to point out that our interest in the present study lies in other areas. We deliberately refrain from remarks on discursive identity construction with which these narratives overflow. The inevitable clash between the expected researcher objectivity and the nature of this community of practice is addressed in great detail elsewhere (Rüdiger and Dayter forthcoming). For the purposes of this paper, the textual passages are taken at face value and treated as a personal narrative irrespective of the identity work that goes on therein.

In this paper, we will examine the PUA field reports through the analytical lens of framing. In the next section, we will explain what frames are and how paying attention to the structure of expectations can benefit the narrative analysis. In the subsequent three sections, we will gradually go deeper into the successive framing levels: thematic community, textual genre, and outcome evaluation. Finally, in the conclusion we bring together the findings to demonstrate that framing is one of the key devices through which the authors guide the readers towards their preferred interpretation of the past events.

2 Framing in narrative

To explain our interest in the field report as an online narrative genre, let us introduce an example from our data. This report was posted on an American message board for PUAs in 2014 and the fragment we cite is fairly representative of its kind:

> (1) *Here is the account on my first encounter. We had gone out and I number closed with a German girl (I left the city and so never called but great for confidence). Anyway, on return to the hostel I met a wonderful girl from my home town. We made eye contact while I was talking with a friend, excused myself and began speaking with her. Used the common travellers lines, seemed to work well, she had a rather gummy smile used it as a neg, she stopped smiling, is said it's alright I think it's quite cute, rewarded with an even gummier smile. We went outside so her friend could smoke, as her friend went back in I held her back and kiss closed.*[3]

As frames (Tannen 1993), or schemas (Chafe 1977), or structures of expectation (Ross 1975) for organising past experiences go, this one is a striking choice to tell a story of a first flirtatious encounter with an attractive woman. It clashes rather dramatically with a conventional choice of a [ROMANTIC ENCOUNTER] frame, including a predefined set of roles: "a nervous suitor" vs. "a self-assured pursuer"; a set of category-bound actions: "building a relationship" vs. "manipulating into intimacy"; the objective: "attract a partner" vs. "get sex"; and even the individual lexical items that reflect the pseudo-scientification typical for PUA activities: "kiss closed" vs. "kissed", "number closed" vs. "took her number", "used the common travellers lines" vs. "chatted".

3 All examples from the forums cited in this paper have been reproduced with the original spelling.

In our paper, we approach the analysis of PUA field reports from a vantage point of framing in language. The overwhelming power of expectations in discourse had struck Tannen (1993), who believed that the notion of expectation underlies a slew of related linguistic concepts: schema (Bartlett 1932, Chafe 1977, Rumelhart 1975), frame (Fillmore 1975, Goffman 1974, Hymes 1974), script (Schank and Abelson 1977), prototype (Berlin and Kay 1969). These terms, of which we adopt *frame*, refer to "a process whereby communicators, consciously or unconsciously, act to construct a point of view that encourages the facts of a given situation to be interpreted by others in a particular manner" (Kuypers 2009: 182).

In linguistic analysis, naturally, the focus is on how the frames are reflected in verbalisation. In contrast to the experiments designed to understand framing by cognitivists, e.g. Channell (1994), in natural discourse sentences are not uttered out of context. A variety of clues are present to help the recipients along in pinpointing the specific frame involved. And "the only way to find out more about how frames are activated is to look at utterances in a wider context" (Bednarek 2005: 703).

With the help of a corpus of field reports, we examine how the linguistic choices of the authors that form the final product result from an interplay of several layers of frames. The overarching frame is that of the community of practice of pick-up artists. The keyword in the accompanying discussion is "knowledge schema". The PUA knowledge schema triggers in the audience the specific expectations relating to the patterns of behaviour, the actors in the event, and their underlying communicative goals. Within this larger context the contributions to the message boards are framed genre-wise as personal narratives with the help of narrative framing devices such as temporal adverbs, warrants for telling, ordering of the elements etc. This level is often neglected or taken for granted in the linguistic analysis of frame construction. Bednarek (2005: 695), for example, says that normally "readers know in advance what type of text they are dealing with: a newspaper article, a 18th century novel [...] and thus, the respective frame is invoked simply because of the situation". We agree with this assessment and in the following we would like to unpack the ways in which a situation instigates a certain text type frame within a knowledge schema. On yet another level of embedding, the authors describe their exploits through attribute framing (Levin et al. 1998) as a success or a failure.

Because frames are, after all, a theoretical construct that is not directly observable in language, various proxies have been used to study them: association and reaction tests in the cognitive tradition, conversation analysis and close attention to communication breakdowns in the more discursive approach. In this paper, however, the emphasis is not on the interactional analysis of frames. Rather, we rely on the frequency and even omnipresence of certain features (which becomes evident in the quantitative analysis of a corpus) to assume that these strategies must work for the speakers on some level if they consistently produce them.

We analyse these framing practices in the order of increasing complexity and detail, from the global knowledge schema to the situational expectations of pick-up artists. The frame-based analysis discloses the malleable nature of human experience and underscores the role of primary frameworks that are "assumed (explicitly or in effect) by the individual in deciding what it is that is going on, given, of course, his particular interests" (Goffman 1974: 26). A glance at the activities of the pick-up artists allows us to posit another conclusion: our understanding of the situation and even our subconscious emotional response to it are subject to the influence of the assumed knowledge schema. As will be shown in the paper, PUAs impose the sports or military frame on the first social contact between a man and a woman, encouraging the followers to see it as a training session to improve a particular skill. It appears that reframing a romantic encounter as another type of activity, which is not as firmly predicated on a man's self-worth as a deserving partner or a good human being, removes the insecurities associated with it.

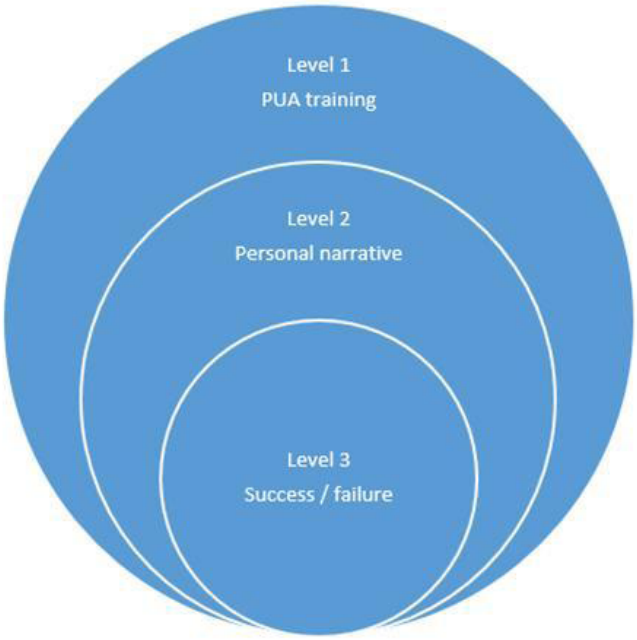

Figure 1. Levels of framing of PUA field reports.

3 The narrative reconstruction of experience

3.1 The first layer: cue [PUA TRAINING]

The notion of a shared knowledge schema that signals a certain understanding of a situation to all participants is inevitably grounded in the idea that the participants form a community. In the case of pick-up artists, a large and diffuse network of people whose common ways of doing things have evolved as a consequence of being involved into a common activity, this community is best understood in terms of a "community of practice" (CofP). Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992:464) introducing CofP into the sociolinguistic toolbox defined it as "an aggregate of people who come together around mutual engagement in some common endeavour". The three critical dimensions of a CofP include mutual engagement, a joint negotiated enterprise and a shared repertoire of negotiable resources accumulated over time (ibid.). In recent work on computer-mediated communication (CMC), the CofP framework has been usefully applied to virtual environments to cover digitally-based communities of practice (Graham 2007; Hössjer 2013; Perelmutter 2013). The members of PUA forums form their community ties based on the practices surrounding the scientificated seduction techniques, including learning the skills, practicing them, and reporting on the achievements. The shared set of values and terminology is perpetuated through the numerous guides, DVDs, and apprenticeship-like practices in the art of speed seduction, or "The Game". Although in terms of network ties the PUA community of practice is a polycentric system with many discrete cells organised around geographical locations or online platforms (this is an observation based on our preliminary scouting of PUA online community for data collection), the cells define themselves through the belonging to the pick-up movement.

Returning to example (1) of a field report, the reader has surely recognised the sequence of events as what normally happens in Western society when a man meets a woman, cast, however, within a different knowledge schema. Such schemas are contexts, or pre-existing environments populated by signs and their associated meanings - such as body language, pictures, spoken or written language. Example (1) is a marked schema of a field report by a pick-up artist. We will refer to this schema as the level 1 frame, or [PUA TRAINING] (see Figure 1). The schema is clearly signposted as such for the target audience by a number of framing devices, which we will discuss in the following section.

One of the ways in which the expectations of the narrator in regard to how his audience would perceive the report become evident is recognisable on the structural level. The place at which the authors present their stories already gives the audience the first clue. For example, the subsections of the message boards from which we drew the data contain descriptive headings that invite the PUA field reports, as opposed to any regular dating advice or conquest story:

(2a) This is the Place to Share Your Experiences in the Field. Find out What Really Works Today.

(2b) Share your failure and success stories. Learn what works and avoid what doesn't.

(2c) Brag about your success and analyse your failures. Please share your techniques and why you think they worked/didn't work, so others can learn from your experience.

These descriptions contain several types of cues: the core terminology, the reference to category-bound activities, and the characteristic stance. The core terminology such as "field" or "technique" flags the message board as potentially interesting for PUA followers due to its relevance to the scientific or military conceptual metaphor that PUAs tend to impose on their activities. A well-developed technical vocabulary with the terms partly borrowed from the military or business domains, partly having undergone semantic or grammatical shift, partly unique (see examples in Table 1) is the most prominent linguistic feature of the PUA discourse: we found 194 distinct terms that occurred 558 times in the corpus of 24,000 tokens. The category-bound activities such as "learn" and "share" further confirm the reader's expectations concerning the PUA frame, since they invoke the common endeavour of the PUA community. Finally, the superior, advertising stance of a PUA educator is evident in the imperative mood of the captions. Taken together, these minimal cues add up to a well-grounded expectation on the part of the reader that the appropriate understanding of the author's intention can be achieved if the reading is informed by the background knowledge and values of the PUA universe.

Table 1. PUA terminology and its origin.

Derivation	PUA term	Meaning
Semantic shift	to open Pron.ACC	to start pickup, to begin a conversation with a set
	to close Pron.ACC	to end an interaction by gaining a woman's contact information or by performing a sexual act
…accompanied by grammatical shift	to game Pron.ACC	to interact with women using PUA techniques
	close (n)	*see above*; the act of ending an interaction
	open (n)	the first step in pickup, beyond making eye contact
	to approach (intrs.)	to start an interaction with a woman
Military domain	to engage / disengage	to involve a woman into an interaction / opp.
	to eject	to leave a set
Sports domain	game	interacting with women and using PUA techniques
	routine	a gambit, story, or memorized pattern of actions that the PUA can use during an interaction
	obstacle	a person or entity that tries to prevent a PUA from progressing with his target
Business domain	to portray her as abundance	to lower a woman's value, to make her feel unwanted
	to lower Pron.GEN value	*see above*
	DHV (demonstration of higher value)	showing one's popularity
Science domain	to calibrate	controlling your actions to produce an outcome
	pre-selection	communication of the PUA's value based on his ability to provide evidence of already having women in his life
	willingness to emote	readiness to talk about feelings in an appropriate way
Unique	kino (n)	physical interaction
	to sarge	go out in field, usually with other PUAs, with the explicit intention of picking up girls

The headings that authors assign to their message posts are perhaps the most telling and least ambiguous cue to the knowledge schema. Out of 37 posts in our corpus, 17 held the self-label of a "field report", "lay report" or "FR", one more contained an elliptical reference to a "report", and two positioned the posts as asking for PUA advice on technique.

The manner in which a story is interactionally occasioned is another important flag for the orientation towards the PUA community. Compare the beginning of a storytelling post from the PUA corpus and from a non-PUA dating advice (DA) webpage:

(3) PUA: I know I am against stores but yes I just approached a 10 in freaking Wal-Mart of all places. This chick was super tall (I am 6'3 and felt like she was up to me), okay face but slamming body.

(4) DA: I need some advice. I'll start this off by giving some information about me. Basically, I'm a 20 year old guy who has never had a girlfriend. When I was in school and stuff, I had several crushes on girls [...]

As linguistic research on storytelling shows, stories tend to be accountably occasioned (Jefferson 1978): the storyteller provides a warrant for his/her story that posits the reportability value to the listener or explains why the story is being told. Among other things, stories may be prefaced by "Lemme tell you what happened to me today" or a similar warrant (Sidnell 2010: 178). This pattern is recognisable in the second example, where the storyteller prefaces his report with a statement of purpose and a justification for the long description to follow. The first example, however, is strikingly different. The author launches into the story proper with a minimal orientation component, which on the whole creates an impression that the audience is familiar with the author and the details of his love life. This is not exactly the case. Instead, the salient knowledge schema creates an expectation mould into which the first story fits neatly. The mould already contains the story warrant, which in case of the PUA community of practice is twofold and makes an appearance, for instance, in the description of the message board sections discussed above. On the one hand, pick-up artists brag about their achievements and share successful tricks. On the other hand, in the spirit of eternal learning, each field report is open to comments and suggestions - this aspect also determines the great level of detail provided in each report. While the conventional frame of a dating encounter would allow a generous windowing of attention with focus on the pivot points such as noticing a potential partner, or a positive or negative response to an invitation, the field report follows every step of the romantic encounter script including what exactly was said, how the bodies were positioned and so on.

The interactional occasioning of a field report therefore tends to bear a recognisable format. In the beginning of a story, a warrant is claimed through a field report reference, typically in the message heading. It is followed by a step-by-step account of the encounter at the level of detail that would seem completely superfluous in everyday narrative. The conclusion often contains a PUA-specific evaluation and a categorisation of the narrative as one of two PUA field report types: a request for advice or sharing of a successful technique (we look at the conclusions in more detail in Section 3.3.2).

The significance of the existence of the specialized [PUA TRAINING] schema in the reader's mind is clear. As Brown and Yule say, "unless the reader has specialised knowledge about the mentioned entity [...], this type of expression will create a potential discontinuity in the reader's interpretation and require inferencing" (1983: 267). An application of a frame to an otherwise incoherent piece of discourse, such as an abruptly started narrative in example 3, allows the reader to establish at least some degree of coherence (Bednarek 2005). The reader is nudged towards recognising the text as belonging to the frame by a number of increasingly specific cues: the self-labelling, the forum description, the evocative expressions in the text. The frame then guides the reader to make certain inferences regarding the actors and actions in question. How these inferences are resolved in the level 2 text type frame, [PERSONAL NARRATIVE], will be the subject of the next section.

3.2 The second layer: personal storytelling

The concentric frames serve to switch the reader's attention, by means of the ever more specific framing devices, to the intended interpretation of the text and eventually to the author's construal of the situation. Between the [PUA TRAINING] frame that primes one to expect an emotionally detached discussion infused with pseudo-scientific terminology of seduction, and the [SUCCESS REPORT] frame, lies the text type-oriented frame [PERSONAL NARRATIVE].

In her analysis of frames as a means of creating coherence for the hearer, Bednarek (2005) remarks that frames about language and communication are often neglected in linguistic research. We believe that the reason for this neglect might be exactly their intermediate position. Text type frames are less relevant for understanding when the focus of investigation is on specific frames (like Tannen's [PEDIATRIC CONSULTATION]) but at the same time too detailed when we discuss event frames, or scripts, in Ungerer and Schmid's (1996) sense (like [FLYING ON A PLANE]) because then activities and objects are described rather than particular text types and genres.

We would like, however, to recognise the importance of text type frames. It is a topic much described in the literature on frames, cognitive and discourse analytic alike, that frame conflicts are generally problematic in communication - for instance, they trigger lengthy explanations. In situations with low emotional and social investment (talking about rugby or cricket, as in the illustration by Bednarek 2005: 693) a frame conflict may simply be resolved later in the interaction. In the worst case scenario, the hearer will become disinterested or frustrated and abandon the conversational pursuit. In discussing dating and romantic encounters, however, much social capital is at stake. The general feeling in the pick-up artist community is that they are judged and misunderstood by the outsiders; they strive to avoid a frame conflict at the level of a specific speech activity. Therefore, we pay special attention to the stepwise narrowing of the frame that creates an unambiguous contextual expectation in the audience.

As a knowledge schema, [PUA TRAINING] may involve a great number of situations: reading the guides, attending a seminar, meeting a friend to go "sarging". Even discursive activities are varied: instructing a newbie, delivering a "neg", describing a fictional approach situation, reporting on a pupil's PUA practice, writing a book about "The Game"... Therefore, to achieve an optimal calibration of the reader response, the next level needs to be specified as a personal narrative reporting on a genuine recent experience.

There exists a number of devices that may instigate the personal narrative frame. Scholars seem to agree that the most salient features of a narrative are its temporality (Hoffmann 2010) and a sequencing of certain components, for instance the classic model of Orientation - Complicating action - Evaluation - Resolution (Labov and Waletzky 1967).

First, let us consider how the authors of field reports mark the narrative temporality in their account, i.e. position them in the past as a sequence of events that have a causal connection to each other. One strategy to unambiguously mark a text as a personal narrative, even if its other characteristics fail to comply to the gestalt, are the temporal adverbs placed at the key points of the text to mark temporal shifts (Virtanen 1992: 2). These adverbials denoting a definite point in time (example 5) signal a new stage in the text, normally at the temporal juncture or at the start of the complicating action:

(5) today *was really odd, I had two 2nd dates with girls I have been id recently number closed randomly in the streets.*

The clause-initial point-in-time adverbials tend to occur in our data with great frequency, marking almost every sentence. This is evidence of the high density of complicating actions in field reports - a feature which will be addressed again below.

One of the key linguistic means through which temporality is expressed in a text is grammatical tense. In the traditional Labovian view, the analysts normally expect the temporal juncture to be marked with one or more past tenses, since a personal narrative in that framework refers to a report of past events. Although in our data the field reports are predominantly built around the simple past tense, one non-past tense usage is prominently exhibited – namely, the Historical Present. It has been suggested that the historical present is a stylistic device that brings immediacy to the tale being told, making it "vivid and exciting" (Schiffrin

1981: 46, see also Günthner 2000, Leech 1971, Palmer 1965). The historical present (see example 6), together with the package of linguistic devices that we label "graphic narrative detailing" (see example 7; cf. Dayter and Rüdiger 2014: 203) contributes to the impression of the authenticity and makes the events come alive in the reader's mind:

(6) So a friend calls me up. He has 2 HBs over his house and needs some back-up. I go over there and chat up this little HB7 with braces

*(7) we try to catch up but don't hold it very well because there are speakers at the podium (*speaking about the federal reserve, organic foods, student loan debt, *etc, etc, etc). Everytime I suggest relocating she never budges--its fine, no reason to go crazy. Eventually she tries to go out and* get her phone charged and sign up for some more stuff through out her week. *She comes back half an hour later as I'm chowing down and talking to someone.* I scoot next to her *and we do small talk for a few mins and then she leaves again.*

The authenticity component appears especially important since it is a condition of acceptability of field reports that they are genuine recollections of a PUA's "approaches". If a report is nothing more than fiction, one of the main purposes, i.e. educational feedback, is defeated. The report author in example 7 includes minute detail about the content of the speeches during his date which is near irrelevant to the plot, but which persuades the reader that the author was indeed present at the political rally. Compare this to example 8, written by a member of PUA forums who has often been called out by other members regarding fictitiousness of his reports:

(8) All my friends were macking. I couldn't be prouder in my troops.
1am: Me and torrey were walking out to check out the bitches in the front lawn. Instantly some girl grabs torrey. We start gaming a four set. farking perfect. Soon willy and hunter show up and we're all paired up.

Here, the author provides general summaries of his pick-up successes, but does not elaborate as to, for example, exactly how he and his friends came to be "all paired up", although normally a report would give the specifics on "gaming a four set" to enable further commentary.

Along with the lists of irrelevant but exact details, graphic narrative detailing is achieved through giving precise numerical data on the training session (a move that also contributes to the "scientified" perception of PUA activities) and, importantly, a dramaturgical rendering of the direct speech of the participants (including mediated communication such as text messages, emails, etc.):

(9) I have opened 80-90% of HB9's correctly though

(10) Lisa: "Ill say hi from you, but who the hell didn't like you? : D Oh and tell your friends they missed a great night."
Me: "I don't remember her name, but she came shortly after I said hi to all of you and choose for some reason to roll eyes at me, intead of saying hi : D"

Numerical data appears to be a powerful authenticating device: in one form or another, it is present in 31 out of the 37 postings (giving the exact number of approaches and closes, exact time periods spent on the activity, group size, bra size, evaluating women on a scale from 1 to 10). No detail, it appears, is too trivial for a field report. What the authors lack in persuasive rhetoric they make up for in observation skills.

Despite the disjointed and rambling nature of many field reports in our data (as we mentioned earlier, the reports are judged on the level of detail and authenticity rather than literary style), in structure they undoubtedly constitute a coherent narrative with one or more temporal junctures between narrative clauses. In fact, a report often involves a sequence of temporal junctures, all amounting to different complicating actions, bracketed by an orientation and a coda:

(11) (all extracts from the same posting)	
Location: Small City, New England Objective: Number Close I planned to sarge the same venue as in my first field report. There was a rock band this evening so I swapped out my cowboy boots for work boots and added a leather jacket.	Orientation
The cab company took half an hour to 45 minutes to pick me up. This, along with the fact they picked up another fare to a different destination en-route definately knocked me out of whatever fragile state I had due to fatigue.	Complicating action
I enter the venue and there are far fewer people there than the last time, and most of them are couples. I meet the shooter girl from the last time and get a nice hug, which helps with social proof.	Complicating action
Just then a group comes out with this HB8. Shes talking with thus guy, loud and non stop and say "How do you roll with this girl?!" She shoots back with "You're so mean!"	Complicating action
I accomplished my objective, but it wad poorly done. This left me in an off state for days. I learned that if I am exhausted, it's better to refine my game than sarge.	Coda

Along with the characteristic structure O-CA-CA…CA-E(valuation)-C, a [PERSONAL NARRATIVE] instigating component can be found in the prototypical narrative clauses for each element. Complicating action typically subsumes arrival or departure of actors at the scene of the romantic encounter, or specific PUA steps such as "demonstrate higher value", "neg", "use as a pivot", "escalate to kino". Orientation is the factual description of the location for the game, and sometimes the statement of purpose for a training session, e.g. "approach 3 targets", "k-close 2 HB3" etc. Coda is a summary of the training session that gives the author the chance to provide an ultimate interpretation of the event as a success or a failure. Finally, evaluation is highly PUA-specific and involves assessment of the objects and actions anchored within the community of practice, for instance, for their potential to achieve a "close":

(12) I don't recommend Facebook as a way of getting contact details […]

(13) I always think brining up sex into the conversation although casually can help escalate things.

A common formulation of an evaluative comment involves a statement with the modal verb "should", thus highlighting the role of expectation in the framing of PUA reports. An interesting aspect of the data emerges if we look at the collocations of "should": in the PUA corpus, it collocates with "I" on the left in commentary such as 14 and 15. In the reference corpus of the non-PUA dating forum posts, on the contrary, "should" collocates with "I" on the right and constitutes an entirely different discursive move - a request for advice.

(14) I was not assertive enough though and did not lead as much as I should have.

(15) I probably should have grab the girl by the hips and led the dancing interaction.

On the whole, the [PERSONAL NARRATIVE] frame is invoked through a number of clues that are easily recognisable as markers of this particular genre by interactants: structuring of narrative elements, temporality, graphic detailing. However, the [PERSONAL NARRATIVE] is embedded within the [PUA TRAINING], and consequently provides the matrix for the next framing level, [SUCCESS REPORT]. This nested structure ensures the creation of expectation on the part of the audience that guarantees the desired reception of the text and prevents a confrontation over conflicting frames.

3.3 The third layer: there are no losers in this Game

So far, we have shown how PUA field reports embody narratives of past experiences while positioning these within the overarching [PUA TRAINING] frame. Given the goal-oriented nature of the PUA activities, the encounters with women are presented as either a success or a failure from the narrator's point of view.

Continuing the parallel with the sports or military training, the default lower-level frame for their reports is [SUCCESS]: athletes, Kamoen et al. (2015: 29) note, are usually "winning", because we are told how many matches they won and not how many they lost. Asking how many matches were lost, in contrast, is a marked choice; it is, for instance, a more common choice when it has been emphasised previously that someone is having a bad year (Holleman and Pander Maat 2009).

PUA field reports are written to be read. Each type of report has a response type associated with it: the response to success is praise ("Awesome. You're so good at this") or good-natured jealousy ("Man, I wish I could game like you"), the response to failure is advice or sympathy. Other reactions, such as criticism or no uptake, are also possible but non-prototypical options for both success and failure reports. The choice of a public medium and the substantial amount of work put into the field reports by the writers (an average length of a report is 651 words, with a maximum length of 2,083 words) implies the desire for feedback. In the case of failure reports, the writer, one would assume, is after the preferred reactions (advice or sympathy instead of criticism or non-uptake) and thus needs to find a strategy to make the failed interaction interpretable as a learning moment for the practicing pick-up artist. We have already mentioned how PUAs draw on scientified vocabulary to invoke the [SPORTS / MILITARY TRAINING] frame: similarly, in football commentary one encounters a plethora of specialized terms such as "chip" (a long-distance high shot) or "2-3-5" (a pyramid formation of players). The PUA term density in failure reports is much higher than in success reports: 30 per 1,000 vs. 19 per 1,000 words. The increased density of PUA terminology in accounts of failures strengthens the training/practice frame and emphasises the writer's status as ratified member of the PUA community.

Many psychological studies documented the so-called framing effects on human perception: for instance, Holleman and Pander Maat (2009: 2205) demonstrated how meat labelled "75% lean" had been judged as tastier than meat labelled "25% fat" even though both descriptions were logically equivalent. Similar reactions were elicited in response to the framing of treatment results in terms of mortality or survival (McKenzie and Nelson 2003), of hotel service as bad or not good (Kamoen et al. 2015) and in other domains of life. Along the same lines, a failed interaction with a woman, when coached in PUA terminology, will conceivably be perceived as less of a failed romantic overture and more of a successful trial run.

According to Holleman and Pander Maat (2009: 2206), "listeners infer from the fact that a speaker chooses frame X1 over frame X2 that he endorses a point of view consistent with the property profiled". In field reports, the writer ostensibly chooses frame X1 (interaction with women as a game set within the PUA universe) over frame X2 (dating and relationships). As an added frame effect bonus, the choice of the PUA game frame emphasises the technique-based approach to male-female interaction propagated by the PUA movement: technique and strategy is something which, unlike emotions and sympathy between interlocutors, can be trained and improved through sheer abundant practice. This softens the blow on the unfortunate pick-up artist's feelings and sets him up for success in the future, as long as he continues his training. This mindset is frequently reflected in the individual signatures of forum members (which are automatically added at the end of every post), such as "Success or fail; everything you try can be chalked up as a learning experience~" and "You lose some you win some, learn from your mistakes and get better!"

Another common strategy in establishing the [SUCCESS REPORT] is to set low expectations. In the following excerpt from a field report, the narrator carefully informs the reader about his (rather basic) goals for the evening:

(16) I was there to have some fun and socialize, not to get girls, anyway, but I figured it would be a nice opportunity anyway.

By stating that he only wanted to have a good time (instead of "getting girls"), the narrator sets up low expectations for the narrative to come. If it turns out that he managed to "open" girls, he is an overachiever; if he simply enjoys himself without much success with the female attendees of the party, the night, all in all, was still successful.

Similarly, in this coda of an account of a night out, the narrator specifies his modest goals:

(17) I was only planning to practice A1 - A2 that night anyway, so I felt no pressure to progress further (it was just a bonus).

Besides setting up low expectations regarding his goals, the formulation also reinforces the training frame. In most professional sports, one designates training sessions to practice certain techniques. For example, in football training, time might be set aside to practice dribbling and passing the ball. When one is practicing dribbling, scoring goals becomes secondary if not irrelevant. Similarly, the pick-up artist from example 17 depicted his aim as improving his "approach" and "attraction" skills (A1-A2 are "attraction phases"), not getting a "close", and therefore any outcome could be presented as a success.

3.3.1 Expectation markers

Expectations in general play an important role in PUA field reports. And one situation in which we can observe the presence of expectations in interaction is when these expectations are broken. Linguistically, "a conflict between what the speaker had expected and what is known" can be indicated by the use of expectation markers which communicate that "an event is surprising or unexpected" to the speaker (Aijmer 2002: 251). As Tannen has noted, "but" can fulfil this function and "serves as a transition marking the denial of expectations established by more than one preceding clause or of expectations about narrative coherence" (1978: 203). Other expectation markers listed by Aijmer (2002: 251) include "in fact", "actually", "really", "in actual fact", "as a matter of fact". In the following analysis we will have a closer look at the most frequent of those items, "but", which occurs 188 times in our data.

Comparing the failure and success subcorpora of PUA reports shows that "but" is used 10 times per 1,000 words in failure narratives but only 6 times per 1,000 words in success narratives. In both subcorpora, "but" at times functions as a discourse structuring device, as in examples 18-19 where it appears in expository passages that set the scene:

(18) After about 10 minutes in the group I decided to really see who was out, its only a small venue, but *it was heaving so [it was] very difficult to see individual groups.*

(19) The cops tried to close down Davis picnic day, but *they couldn't contain the testosterone in the air.*

Additionally, in failure reports, "but" is used mainly in two contexts: in relation to the behaviour of the targets or to the actions of the narrator.

When referring to the actions of the women the PUAs were interacting with, "but" can mark the behaviour of the woman as deviating from the PUA's expectation. The use of "but" in 20 indicates that the narrator deems the evasive movements (i.e. pulling back from a kiss) as unexpected in the light of his target accepting other physical signs of affection. Similarly, the use of "but" in 21 marks the point that his new acquaintance has not sent a friend request as a surprise to the narrator.

(20) she has had no problem with me escalating to nibbles on the ear and stuff, but *however when I went in for the kiss she pulled back.*

(21) A few minutes later the whole set gets up to leave, she asks for my full name so she can find me on facebook, but *she hasn't befriended me yet.*

"But" can also serve to mark the behaviour of the narrator as deviating from the expected behaviour of a pick-up artist. The use of "but" in these cases emphasises the knowledge of the narrator regarding proper and well-executed PUA technique and thereby ratifies his position as member of the community (despite the failed interaction!). By positioning his deviant actions as unexpected, the writer sends the message "I know that this behaviour is not good PUA behaviour, but at least I know this and knowing my mistakes I can become better at the game". In example 22, the narrator acknowledges that his conversation starter was bad and below the mark for a pick-up artist. Also noteworthy is the density of PUA terminology in this short extract ("10", "the Game", "opener"), which further emphasises his position as a knowledgeable community member. Similarly, the writer of the field report in 23 knows exactly that it would have been

expected from a pick-up artist to "pull the trigger" and signals that he is not ignorant to the rules of the game (even though he failed to fulfil the expectation).

(22) So I strolled up to this 10 (My 4th or 5th in the Game) and at least I didn't say my sticking point 10 opener which is "What's Up" but *I said my opener all wrong.*

(23) I've managed to embrace her from behind, kiss her neck but *I somehow couldn't pull the trigger.*

In the success reports, "but" is used to make general statements about PUA technique and thus marks the attempts by the narrator to impart knowledge to the reader. In 24 the narrator challenges the reader to go beyond PUA by juxtaposing PUA philosophy with his own experiences. The use of "but" in 25 legitimises the deviation from the narrator's usual strategy in getting women's contact details.

(24) Yes, I do know that it makes you feel great to know that you can go out and get any girl you want when you're really good at the game, but *that's not the whole picture.*

(25) Now I don't recommend Facebook as a way of getting contact details because its lame but *in this instance it was all I had.*

3.3.2 The codas of success and failure field reports

As we established earlier, the field reports in our corpus generally follow the Labovian narrative structure. 34 of the 37 field reports in our corpus contain a coda, the point which "close[s] off the sequence of complicating actions" and "signal[s] that the narrative has finished" (Labov 1977: 365). In the three field reports without an explicit coda, it is still obvious to the reader that the narrative has come to an end, as the layout of the online forum indicates the end of the posting. In some instances, the coda is explicitly introduced by a subheading (e.g. "Conclusion", "To summarize").

The two types of coda mentioned in Section 3.2 are clearly split between the success and failure reports: while a final evaluative statement, such as "It was a pretty cool experience" is strongly associated with success reports, a request for advice such as "can you guys help with a strategy moving forward" is typical for a failure report. Additionally, the codas of failure reports put extra emphasis on the [TRAINING] frame. Statements such as "Every lost opportunity is a learning experience. There will be plenty more chances and I will not repeat the same mistakes" or "It was a valuable lesson overall since I learned now it is just about making myself happy and making sure I am having fun" frame the failure of the pick-up artist as a helpful learning moment, helping him on his way to become a true "master of the art". Failed interaction codas are interspersed with passages of self-analysis. Some of the narrators make sure to show the reader that they know where their problems in interactions with women are, perhaps to pre-empt criticism but also to ratify their membership status in the PUA community. Knowing your problems is one of the first steps to better yourself. The two following excerpts from failure codas show how this analysis relies on PUA terminology to create an impression of objectivity.

(26) I feel like this is a good example of where my game *is right now: I* open*, have a good conversation, but fail to develop* A2 *ou to move into* A3

(27) By doing so and opening/closing *properly I will not lower my* value *regardless of the reaction of the girl since this is what we teach anyway to be* "drawing state from within"*. Anyways this is what I think I am learning the most since I have YET to* open *a* 10 *properly. I have* opened *80-90% of* HB9*'s correctly though. It just seems* 10*'s are on some level I will have to get to someday.*

All in all, it appears that what it means to be a pick-up artist is to a large degree associated with linguistic proficiency, and chiefly, with having the appropriate terminology at your fingertips, since being able to construe every encounter with a woman as a training session rather than a date is the key to confidence.

4 Conclusion

In this paper, we have attempted to illustrate how the power of expectation governs our perception of what is appropriate and what is not. More specifically, we looked at the verbalised cues that instigate three hierarchical frames in pick-up artists' field reports: [PUA TRAINING [PERSONAL NARRATIVE [SUCCESS REPORT]]]. A community that has often been under public scrutiny (consider the media coverage of PUA or PUA-related "incidents", for example, the notorious case of Julien Blanc who was refused entrance into the UK on the grounds that his presence was "not conducive to the public good" [BBC News 19 November 2014]) is motivated to clearly signpost their territory to prevent outsiders from wandering into their forums with the wrong expectations. It is not surprising, given that the PUA movement presents itself as adepts of "Neuro-linguistic programming[4]", that linguistic strategies play a significant role in their repertoire. Hambling-Jones and Merrison (2012) analysed one of those strategies: the purposeful construction of inequity between interlocutors at the beginning of an interaction in order to facilitate intimacy building in later stages of the acquaintance.

We have established that the [PUA TRAINING] frame is invoked early on through layout and headlines, as well as key lexis. The scientification of the seduction process, which is itself a reflection of the sports, or military exercise, frame imposed by PUAs upon the events of a romantic encounter, finds a verbal expression in the treasure trove of specialized terminology. Our corpus data shows the frequency of 24 PUA terms per 1,000 words. This terminology can be impenetrable to outsiders and serves as an ideal frame-instigating device at the top level of expectation building.

The second layer of framing concerns the level often forgotten in framing literature, namely a text-type frame [PERSONAL NARRATIVE]. This frame is important to orient the reader to the construal of the following text as a causal sequence of past events that had happened to the author. Since authenticity is a key requirement for a field report, the linguistic details that contribute to the [PERSONAL NARRATIVE] gestalt also construct appropriateness of the posting: graphic narrative details involving numerical data, historical present, and abundance of complicating actions.

One of the most interesting aspects of field report framing concerns their presentation as a success or a failure. Although each situation could theoretically be judged objectively on the basis of achieving the PUA's ultimate goal (sex, or at least kiss-close or number-close), the authors are very adept at spinning almost every female reaction as a success. This is accomplished through managing reader's expectations at the start of the report and through restating the purpose of an encounter in the coda. When the encounter is presented as a trial run, the very fact that it took place constitutes a success, notwithstanding the outcome.

To sum up, this data shows once again that the same events can be narratively cast in a variety of guises, depending on who holds the powerful position of the storyteller. Consciously or unconsciously, the reader is being set up to agree with the storyteller's version of the events. The example of the pick-up artists' reports is very striking because their story deviates (hopefully) from the story of a romantic encounter as most of the readership of this article would choose to tell it. The same conclusions about the power of framing, however, hold for any narrative activity and make one doubt the words of R. Taylor that we have only one past but many possible futures (1957). There are, it seems, as many possible pasts as there are historians – each of them only needs to find a suitable audience.

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4 Neuro-linguistic programming is an approach to communication and personal development that is predicated on the belief that one can "program" emotions, cognition and behaviour by mimicking the more superficial aspects of the desirable states. In the decades since its birth, NLP has been thoroughly disproven scientifically by psychologists and linguists alike.

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